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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LA PAZ 001411

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [BL](#)  
SUBJECT: TARIJA: ANOTHER WIN FOR AUTONOMY MOVEMENT

REF: LA PAZ 1395

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) The department (state) of Tarija overwhelmingly approved its autonomy referendum on June 22. Exit polls indicate that autonomy was approved by some 80 percent of those voting (abstention was around 35 percent). The vote clearly adds momentum to the now autonomous eastern lowland states, and increases the likelihood that other highland states will also seek some form of greater autonomy from centralized rule. As Mario Cossio, Tarija's prefect, put it in his jubilant speech following the vote, "now we are four, but soon we'll be nine." While the voting suffered only isolated blockages and disturbances, a private television affiliate in the eastern city of Yacuiba was dynamited the day before the vote. Twenty individuals were arrested and one appears to be a member of the military under the command of the Ministry of the Presidency. News linking the ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) to the terrorist act seems to have boosted the pro-autonomy vote in all regions of the state. End Summary.

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Autonomy Vote in Tarija  
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2. (C) Tarija's autonomy referendum passed by an overwhelming majority on June 22. While varying slightly, all exit polls indicate that about 80 percent of voters were in favor of autonomy and 20 percent against, with an absentee rate of around 35 percent. The MAS leadership was quick to claim victory by summing the no votes to the absentee rate and claiming a "majority" of the population was against autonomy. However, Bolivians generally seem to reject this false logic and MAS spokesmen were clearly under-fire on television talk shows. The feeling from Tarija is one of a euphoric victory and the message from Prefect Cossio, that Bolivia should build its new state model based on popular support for autonomy, currently holds more weight for the majority of Bolivians than the tired rhetoric of the Morales administration.

3. (SBU) The vote itself was generally peaceful, with only

isolated incidents of violence. The vote in favor of autonomy exceeded expectations and was surprisingly strong in eastern Tarija (the Chaco) where the MAS had worked hard to disrupt the vote and was thought to hold significant sway (Reftel). The yes vote carried every region of the state and even exceeded 78 percent in both major cities in the Chaco (Yacuiba and Villamontes). Moreover, the rural/urban divide was not as pronounced as expected. Rural voters approved the referendum by 77 percent (with 38 percent absenteeism), while urban voters approved it by 81 percent (with 34 percent absenteeism). Tarija is the last scheduled autonomy vote, but federalist momentum may keep building on June 29 when Tarija's northern neighbor of Chuquisaca votes for a new prefect in what many see as a proxy vote for autonomy in that state.

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Possible State Terrorism Helped Autonomy  
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¶4. (C) The day before the vote the privately-owned Unitel television affiliate in Yacuiba was attacked with dynamite, although no injuries were reported. This attack, if carried out with the central government's approval as suspected, is alarming and would mark a clear escalation in terms of what Morales and his inner circle are prepared to do to confront the autonomy movement. Twenty people were arrested following the bombing, including Jorge Nava, a military employee under authority of the Ministry of the Government. While Minister Quintana at first claimed that Nava's military identification was false, it has now been verified and an investigation is

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being headed by a state prosecutor, Diego Choque. Ruben Ardaya, the head economic official in Tarija, told Econoff that Nava had been trained in the U.S. under previous administrations, but had recently returned for additional training in Venezuela. As Ardaya put it, "Nava was formed in the U.S., but de-formed in Venezuela". Ardaya, who was in Yacuiba during the vote, claims that the pistol Nava was carrying is the same model used by the Venezuelan special forces.

¶5. (C) While the intention of the attack may have been to disrupt the vote, it had the opposite effect. Tarija's Secretary of Development, Ernesto Farfan, said that the attack clearly rallied regional voters and discredited MAS efforts to prevail in the Chaco. While Yacuiba voted against autonomy in the 2006 vote, it approved the referendum overwhelmingly, by 79 percent. Moreover, despite MAS organized roadblocks and the burning of some ballot boxes by indigenous groups, 59 percent of the population voted in Yacuiba.

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Next Steps  
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¶6. (U) In his speech following the vote, Prefect Cossio assured the state's population that with autonomy everyone would enjoy basic services. While the state already provides free medical coverage, Cossio promised better infant health services and the right of all Tarija residents to a house of their own. He also guaranteed that the state would not accept less than the 15 percent of Bolivia's gas revenues that it received in 2007. (Note: Tarija produces around 85 percent of all gas in Bolivia. The Morales administration recently cut back the share of gas revenues given to the states to pay for its nationwide social security system. End note). Cossio is expected to make a more concrete announcement as to Tarija's first autonomous steps following a Conalde meeting in Tarija June 23 (Conalde is a grouping of the autonomous prefects and representatives from regional civic groups). Economic official Ardaya said that the prefects would announce synchronized steps to be taken in each of the four autonomous states.

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Comment  
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17. (C) The next battle in Tarija will be the August recall elections. Prefect Cossio is in for a fight, but may have been given a boost by the inability of the MAS to disrupt the autonomy vote and the current perception in the state that a military man was directed by MAS officials to commit a terrorist act. Whether or not the charges stick, Cossio's call to use the momentum of autonomy to build a new Bolivia is one that increasingly resonates across the country. While a genuine dialogue between the regions and the Morales administration could build such a country, it appears more likely that the two sides will continue to battle with a zero-sum mentality; the fight is too personal and victories by one side unfortunately are always taken as losses by the other. The upcoming vote June 29 for prefect in the Chuquisaca department, where the MAS is expected to lose big, could signal that Evo has lost the majority of the country and is increasingly ruling over a de facto divided nation.  
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